

South Lake Union Neighborhood Plan

History of South Lake “Union”

South Lake Union is situated in an area that has long played a vital role in Seattle’s history. A trail used by Native Americans connected the south end of Lake Union with Seattle’s harbor. The Lake was referred to by Native Americans as “Xa’ten” (Little Lake) or “Terms Chuck” (Little Water). Lake Washington was considered the Big Water. Native Americans had trails leading from the different lakes to Elliott Bay and the Duwamish River, which was a center for the Duwamish people. Early European settlers found several Indian camps on the shoreline near Westlake. Originally Lake Union was about one-third larger than it is today. A small bay extended inland to Mercer Street and a stream lay in and around Boren Avenue.

David Denny, one of the original Seattle pioneers, was the first white settler on the lake. His land claim of 1853 extended from Mercer to Denny Way. With the pioneers came industry, one of the first was logging. The formerly weeded area was quickly cleared. With the arrival of the first sawmill came the beginning of the lake’s filling. Mills dumped sawdust into the water, covering the small bay at the Southwest corner of the lake.

The tract of land north and west of David Denny’s was claimed by Thomas Mercer (another original settler); Thomas Mercer is supposed to have named Lake Union, hoping that someday this lake would join Lake Washington and Puget Sound.

The Cascade community, one of the original Seattle residential communities, is the eastern flank of the neighborhood. Further east is the I-5 Freeway, which now separates the neighborhood from Capitol Hill. To the west lies a mixture of newer buildings, Aurora Avenue (Highway 99), and Seattle Center.

Properties within South Lake Union display a unique architecture of the working 1920’s. Warehouses were built for manufacturing, storage and service. Some of Seattle’s first reinforced concrete structures

were built in South Lake Union, and one can clearly view the transition from brick, timber framed buildings to concrete and brick structures. Also prevalent are numerous examples of post and beam construction which have proven to be very adaptable to reuse. Buildings display a refreshing variety of decoration, including excellent examples of terra cotta, ornate brick patterns, and multi-pane industrial windows.